A Leap of Faith

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A Leap of Faith

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Summary

Then, before he'd had time to process it, there'd been a whirl of movement, followed by a sudden and forceful shove against Tim's chest. Something – the parapet wall – had hit the back of his legs, the momentum sending his body tumbling back and over and—

Oh. Right.

He'd been pushed off the building.

Notes

Update 23/7-2023: Did a pretty intense rewrite (added 5000 words oop) and changed the title, but the story is basically the same. If you've already read this you won't really miss anything significant by skipping it.

Original title; The Dream of Flight

See the end of the work for more notes

The first thing that welcomed Tim as he surged back into consciousness was *pain.*

It shot through his temples in sharp pulses and sliced across his ribs with every breath, its malevolent claws piercing bone and muscle. The ground underneath him shuddered with every beat of his heart, synchronous with the vicious pounding of his head.

Noticing the metallic tang of blood on his tongue, and the way the ground swooped and swayed underneath him, a wave of dread washed over him.

What the hell was happening?

Distantly, he knew he was wearing his suit, felt the collar of his armor digging into his neck, his cape pinned uncomfortably between the ground and his back. However, the building panic at the severity of this revelation – as he realized that he was completely defenseless in what had to be the middle of a fight – was immediately forgotten the moment he managed to pry his eyes open.

Despite the darkening effect of his mask, the intensity of the blue sky sent a wave of agony through the side of his head. Tim flinched, instinctively throwing his hands up to shield his face, but newfound pain that flared up across his shoulder and ribs stopped him with a strangled gasp.

Breathing through the lingering ache, Tim squeezed his eyes shut. Jesus, *fuck,* what had he gotten himself into? Christ, he…he hadn't been *shot,* had he?

But as he slowly inched back into consciousness and gained enough sense to assess the situation, it became apparent that none of his injuries really screamed *gunshot wound* at him.

The pulsating ache behind his eyes suggested, unsurprisingly, a nasty concussion, the fire burning in his right hip that it might be, or had nearly been, dislocated. The pain that flared up along his back and chest with every hitched breath pointed at bruised ribs. And while a single bullet was unlikely to cause these symptoms, they were at least clear signs that there was *a reason* why Red Robin had been reduced to a distressed heap on the ground.

He just couldn't remember what that reason *was*.

As the spinning heavens above him slowed to a stop, the confusion and pain merged into something more like *fear*. He should get up. He should *move*. Whoever had knocked him down could return at any moment, could realize that he had woken up, and consider him a threat.

But Tim could barely even *breathe* without having his ribs writhing in agony. His skin was already slick with sweat, causing his hair to stick to the side of his damp forehead. Despite this, his palms only grew warmer, his elevated heartbeat thundering against his neck.

He needed to get up. He needed to *calm the fuck down*.

Failing at both tasks, Tim forced his eyes open once again, desperate to find anything that could be of help.

Skyscrapers towering over him were what immediately drew his attention. They looked more like giant mirrors than buildings, reflecting the city and pale blue sky in their blank windows. Beside him, a bulkhead rose up, its shadow cutting a diagonal line across his chest, blessedly shielding his face from the sun. Barely even ten yards away, a cellular tower was built along the parapet that stretched along the edge of the…rooftop?

Because that's what this place was, Tim dazedly realized; a completely unfamiliar rooftop that, judging by the proximity of the top of the warping skyscrapers, put Tim an alarming amount of feet above the ground.

But what the hell was he *doing* there?

The hazy light that the sun created around the edges of the bulkhead made Tim's head throb. He winced and dazedly turned his attention in the other direction, his searching gaze immediately landing on the parapet a few feet away. It wasn't a significant construction; a slightly uneven barrier made out of weathered cement, short enough that its edges had barely reached Tim's hip when he'd been standing and—

And just before Tim could question just *how* he knew that, something in his mind shifted and *clicked* into place.

He remembered. The dread that had shot through his body when the gun had been raised. The culprits scattering upon his sudden arrival. The pained grunt that one of them had emitted when Tim disarmed

him with a sharp snap of his quarterstaff.

Then, before he'd had time to process it, there'd been a whirl of movement, followed by a sudden and forceful shove against his chest. Something – *the parapet wall* – had hit the back of his legs, the momentum sending his body tumbling back and *over* and—

Oh. Right.

He'd been pushed off the building.

He remembered it all too clearly now; seeing the view of the rooftop disappear as he fell back and then *down*, how his stomach had rose to his throat and the electric shock of horror had shot up his spine as his fingers reached for his hip, for his only hope of survival, and grasped at nothing.

And despite everything occurring in under a few seconds, time had slowed down long enough for a thought to cross Tim's mind.

I'm going to die.

But then he'd blinked, and there he was; somehow back on the roof, staring up at that eternal sea of blue, blue, *blue*—

Tim flinched out of the memory, sucking in a sharp breath as pain cut into his shoulder and back.

Then he paused, perplexed.

There was no way his ribs *weren't* bruised, possibly even fractured. His head had seemingly fared even worse, agony continuously pulsing across his right temple in tandem with his racing heart. But despite all this, he was *alive*.

Way more alive than he *should've* been.

Because there was no way someone could fall off of a nearly two-hundred-foot-tall building and somehow live to tell the tale. There wouldn't be anything left of them except a red mess amongst shards of broken bones.

So how the hell was Tim still breathing?

The question swirled around in Tim's mind like a piece of debris caught in a storm, but the bottomless gap in his memory remained, stubborn and undeviating. All he could do was lay still and breathe

and *hope* it wasn't brain matter trickling down his ears, that the increasing pressure in his chest wasn't because his lungs were filling with blood.

Or that the muffled sound of rapidly approaching footfalls wasn't one of the culprits on their way to finish what they had started.

Cold panic surged through Tim's veins. Despite the pain it caused him, he tensed, his fingers twitching against the ground, instinctively wanting to reaching reach for his staff. But he didn't know where it was, couldn't even find the strength to lift his head and look around for it, and all the while his brain never stopped screaming at him to *'get up, you need to move,'* as the footsteps came closer and closer and —

—and then the blurry yet unmistakable figure of the Batman rounded the corner of the bulkhead and Tim—

Tim could *breathe* again.

There was a moment, almost unnoticeable in its brevity when Tim could've sworn he saw the Bat freeze, almost *recoil.* Then he blinked, and he was already by his side, lowering himself to one knee. His movements blurred as he freed his arms from the cape, gauntlets coming to a hesitant stop an inch above Tim's chest.

Tim only realized that he had been speaking to him when he suddenly ripped off his gloves and coaxed his fingers between Tim's neck and the collar of his suit, his lips moving soundlessly as he leaned closer.

If Tim focused, he could hear the hum of his voice, muffled as if he was speaking through water. However, his concentration was wavering as he found himself abruptly distracted by the ringing in his ears, by the sudden realization that his thigh was killing him, and the way his chest *burned* with every hitched breath.

He knew he was panicking. His senses were overwhelmed, his skin prickling with unease. Still, he couldn't stop his descent as he was dragged down the spiral of panic, his mind plagued by confusion and *pain* and—

Something grazed the side of Tim's head as fingers gripped the corner of his mask and *tugged.* Tim jolted, his hand reflexively shooting up, latching on and *pushing.* He didn't remember ever closing his eyes but they snapped open in alarm. Once he'd blinked the world into focus, he realized his fingers had wrapped around Batman's armored wrist,

holding the man's hand away from his head.

It was like the touch startled his senses into working; the roaring in his ears was reducing as if he was fighting his way through water – up, up, up – until he finally broke the surface, and *sound* washed over him.

He could hear *everything*; the rumble of traffic echoing from the city below; the whistling of the wind brushing past them; the distant thrumming of a helicopter circling the Gotham sky. And, above all, the voice that was practically shouting into his ear.

"—can you hear me? Red, *talk* to me."

Dick – because that was so clearly *not* Batman's voice – sounded out of breath, his words rushed as though he couldn't get them out fast enough.

Tim tried to reply, but his dry throat only allowed a sound dwelling between a tired grumble and an inquiry to pass his lips.

The fingers in his hair faltered. Dick was deadly silent for a few heartbeats, and despite his shielded eyes, Tim could tell he was staring. Then, carefully, as if afraid of the answer he was going to receive, he repeated, "Red, can you hear me?"

Tim swallowed a groan as his lungs pressed against his ribs, and wet his dry lips. "Yeah, I…I hear you." The words were slurred, his tongue too thick for his mouth, too heavy. Talking made him once again register the taste of blood, the way the tip of his tongue throbbed and stung. He must've bitten it at some point. Figures.

The moment Tim spoke, Dick's shoulders visibly sagged, and an inaudible string of words shaped as a sigh escaped his mouth. Still, he wasted no further time as he reached forward, pinching Tim's mask between his thumb and forefinger. "I'm going to remove this, okay?"

Either Tim took too long to answer, or Dick hadn't been planning to wait for him to respond as he was already peeling the mask off before Tim could open his mouth.

Distantly, Tim wondered why the process was so painless. The adhesive usually had to be dissolved in order for the mask to be removed. Had he failed to apply enough adhesive? Or had his eagerness to get out of his claustrophobic apartment left him sloppy and reckless?

But then something trickled down the side of his face as the mask was lifted, and a cocktail of understanding and *horror* spread like ice through his stomach.

Jesus, he—was he really *crying?* What if Jason—hell, what if *Damian* was around? Fuck, he needed to pull himself together.

Unfortunately, the Universe had other plans for him.

When the first glimpse of unfiltered light reached Tim's eyes, a pulse of pure *agony* shot through his head. He gasped and squeezed his eyes shut, a fresh wave of hot tears rolling down toward his ears. It felt like someone had put an ice pick to his temple and was hammering it into his skull. Even the newfound brightness seeping through his eyelids was almost unbearable, made his skin itch and tingle with the need to distract himself from the pain.

Fuck. This was *humiliating*. But all he could do was breathe through it, the tremors in his hands gradually diminishing as the worst of the pain retreated.

"Hey."

Steeling himself, Tim let a few moments pass before he dared to crack his eyes open, immediately suppressing a flinch when the haunting image of the cowl swam into view.

The moment Tim's gaze zeroed in on him, the corners of Dick's mouth twitched downwards, obviously displeased. Before Tim could even process the rush of emotion that washed over him at the sight, Dick pressed his thumb against Tim's eyebrow, peeling his eyelid back. Ignoring Tim's sharp inhale at the pain it caused him, Dick peered into Tim's eye in silence, before finally drawing his hand back. "How… how are you feeling?"

He sighed halfway through the question, his voice growing more monotone with each word. It was like he was tucking away the uncertainty he'd displayed moments before, wiping the concern away as if he didn't want Tim to witness it. It made Tim's chest tighten for reasons beyond his injuries, a burning emotion he could not pinpoint building inside his ribcage.

Though it pained him, Tim's eyebrows twitched into a frown.

Something was wrong. Something was very, very *wrong*. It gnawed on him, a feeling more intense than the never-ending flashes of pain that

pulsed behind his eyes, worse than the anxiety swirling in his gut.

And it all boiled down to the fact that Tim hadn't spoken to the man hovering over him in over six months.

It wasn't speculation to state that after the Darkseid explosion and Bruce's…*disappearance*, Dick had changed. It hadn't been completely unexpected. At the end of the day, besides Alfred, Dick had known Bruce the longest. Their bond was strong, had been what had allowed him to be the first child to set foot in the Manor in well over a decade, the first person to bring joy and *life* to the mansion in a way Tim had never been able to.

So, no. Tim hadn't blamed Dick for grieving. For *hurting*.

But Tim had been grieving too. Granted, he hadn't had the same relationship with Bruce as the man had had with his children. But he'd still *known* him, had still loved—

Tim had cared for him. And he, too, had been hurting.

And then, he'd been fired.

Walking into the cave and seeing Damian dressed in an all-too familiar color scheme had felt like a knife plunging into his back. The way Dick's voice had gone from concerned to stern to furious within the span of a few minutes had been even *worse*, the knife twisting in deeper with every word that had poured out of both of them, setting his chest alight and making him dizzy with pain and confusion and *anger*.

It…it had been *bad*. Tim had said things he now regretted.

(He only hoped that Dick could say the same.)

After that fateful evening and their irrevocable clash, the lingering anger had been Tim's fuel. It had been the flame that kept the engine going, the only thing forcing him to push forward. He hadn't dared stoke it, afraid that if he fed it too much it would spread and grow too quickly for him to control. Instead, he had kept it barely alive, had become familiar with the heat of it within his ribcage, with the billowing smoke that made his eyes burn and his lungs ache.

He had always thought that once it was all over, the fire, along with the pain and anger and *despair* that he had kept under lock and key for so long, would surge up and finally consume him.

And then he had done it. He had overcome the impossible and found Bruce, had then gone one step further and *brought him back*.

It had taken a while to thaw from the shock, even longer to convince himself that seeing Bruce – feeling his hand in his, his heartbeat under his cheek – was *real*. And just like that, he had completed his mission. And the dreaded moment had arrived.

For the first time in six months, he had taken a breath and had actually *felt* the air flowing through his lungs.

And then he'd let go.

In response, the flame that had burned searing hot in his chest for hours upon hours, days upon days, *weeks upon weeks*, the one he'd expected to surge up and swallow him whole – fizzled out into nothing.

And all he was left feeling was…*drained.*

With that final thought, the underlying cause of Tim's distress dawned on him.

When Batman had rounded the bulkhead, Tim had felt…relieved. No, scratch that, he had been fucking *ecstatic* at the sight of him. Because he had looked at him, and for a moment, he'd only seen the man he'd first been introduced to all those years ago, the man who had offered him nothing but love and care and *safety*. For a moment, Tim had been convinced that everything was going to be okay.

But that man wasn't here.

Instead, the man kneeling next to him was the person who had taken Robin from him, the one who had seen no problem in openly calling him insane. He was the man who Tim had once considered his brother, and who'd refused to listen to him even when Tim had insisted and begged and *pleaded*.

Tim shouldn't feel safe with him here.

He should be scared.

More importantly; he should be *angry*.

He *wanted* to be angry. Hell, he *longed* for the flame to be ignited again, to be soothed by its burning comfort, by its chaotic crackle. He

craved the energy it granted him, itched for the inability to think rationally *for once*, and hurt Dick as much as Dick had hurt *him*.

After everything Tim had gone through, he at least deserved that.

And yet—

And yet there was a part of Tim that wondered what emotion was etched into Dick's features, shielded behind the permanent scowl of the cowl. Maybe his eyes would be tired and worn, similar to the ones Tim had grown accustomed to after Bruce's disappearance. Maybe his furrowed brow would reveal poorly hidden anger as he was forced to abandon his mission and fix whatever problem Tim's growing recklessness had caused.

Or maybe, just maybe, his blue gaze would be gentle and concerned, the skin between his eyebrows deeply creased, forming the expression Tim hadn't seen present on Dick's face for a very long time.

A deep ache settled in Tim's chest when he realized that he was hoping for the latter.

Dick's fingers brushing through his hair drew Tim back to the present. A shiver ran across his skin at the sensation, his eyes threatening to flutter closed.

"Red."

Tim jerked at Dick's voice, at the sharpness of it. His gaze flickered up, and he realized with a start that Dick was staring at him. Intently. *Expectantly*. Always awaiting an explanation, always expecting perfection—

No, wait, that wasn't…that wasn't right. There'd been a question, hadn't there?

He opened his mouth to ask but was interrupted when his mind suddenly decided to hit *replay*. He felt himself tumbling over the edge again, his stomach rising up to his throat, his heart freezing in his chest. He glanced at the parapet, the confused furrow of his eyebrows making his head feel like it was splitting in two.

"I—I don't…" He trailed off, breath hitching as the ground swayed underneath him. Dragging his tongue across his teeth, he tried to gather his thoughts, breathing through the pressure building in his temples. "I don't, I thought— B, didn't I *fall?"*

The muscles in Dick's jaw jumped, his lips pressing together in a thin line. When he finally responded, his reply was jarringly curt. "Yes."

His voice caught Tim off guard, filled with an emotion that could only be described as *anger*. It was a threat in sheep's clothing, a clear warning not to push further, and the ice reached all the way to Tim's lungs.

He'd already humored the possibility, had in all honesty expected some heat, but…could Dick really be *that* angry? Unable to contain his frustration even when he saw Tim on the ground, injured and defenseless?

Tim's lack of self-preservation reared its head as his gaze flickered over to the parapet. "But I'm…still on the roof." He mumbled weakly.

(*'Brilliant deduction, Drake'*, a voice suspiciously resembling Damian's hissed in his mind. Tim mentally told him to fuck off.)

Instead of being chastised, all Tim was met with was something soft being pressed against the side of his head. He winced at the touch, his confused gaze flickering back to Dick.

Dick's lips had thinned even further, turning almost white with how hard he was clenching his jaw. "You're still on the roof," he bit out, his attention drawn to something by Tim's ear. The pressure of the soft fabric increased momentarily, and Tim bit back a hiss. "You're *fine*."

If he was trying to hide any emotion under the rumble of the Batman baritone, he was failing spectacularly. The sharpness peaked through the façade, the way he had to *force* each word out of his mouth easily noticeable.

Sighing tiredly, Tim let his eyes slide shut.

He kind of *did* deserve the heat. It was his fault for joining the fight in such a vulnerable location on the roof, for not noticing the advancing man before it was too late. His error could've cost him his life. Worse; it could've cost *Dick* his life.

Fuck. There was no way Dick was going to let this slide.

"Keep your eyes open."

Flinching at the sharpness of his voice, Tim snapped his eyes open. His

head pulsed hotly in response, pain thrumming along his temple as he stared up at the man beside him.

Six months. *Six. Months.* After years of spending time together practically every other day, Dick hadn't seen him, had barely even *spoken* to him in *half a year*. And he still couldn't do the bare minimum and keep the anger and resentment out of his voice.

It was as if he never even cared about Tim to begin with, as if the laughter and tears and *memories* they had shared before Darkseid had never happened. As if Tim was still the stranger from next door.

And okay, maybe Tim was capable of being *a little* angry, the pain acting as the final drop added to the overflowing beaker. It urged him to turn to Dick, to *finally* snap—but the words died in his throat when he realized with a start that he still had his fingers locked around Dick's wrist.

As if burned, Tim withdrew his hand, humiliation warming his cheeks. Distracted by his stupidity, he let his hand fall to his chest and immediately lifted it with a strangled gasp as his sore ribs shrieked in pain.

Dick's head snapped to him so quickly his figure blurred. A slight up-and-down movement of his head gave away the movement of his eyes as they flickered between Tim's chest and his face, connecting the dots and solving the case at rapid speed.

At that moment, Tim wanted nothing more than to tear the cowl to *shreds*.

He despised the feeling of being dissected under Dick's unreadable gaze, to continuously struggle against the instinct to curl in on himself and *hide*. The worst part was that in return, Tim was unable to read the man *at all*. All he had to go on was the displeased curve of his mouth, the measured and sharp breaths he was heaving out of his nose, how the creases in the skin surrounding his mouth had deepened in frustration.

All these details did was amplify the feeling that Tim had done something wrong. That Dick was *angry*.

"Red?"

Tim forced himself to keep his breathing even, to hide the wince as he did so. "I'm…fine. It's nothing—"

“Red Robin, report.”

It was like the words triggered a coded response; Tim was giving a slurred self-assessment before he even realized his lips were moving.

“My head hurts,” he rasped, fighting to quell his own alarm when he realized he was already out of breath, “the right side of my back…a-and my, my right shoulder as well. There’s…my leg— the right one, just above the knee? Feels like a…stab wound? But I don’t remember that. Being stabbed, I mean.” Running his tongue across the back of his teeth, he added, “’n I think I bit my tongue.”

Dick didn’t give any inclination to confirm that he was listening. Which, to be fair, usually meant he was putting all his attention into doing just that; *listening, assessing, solving*. When Tim finally fell quiet, Dick leaned back and picked up a fun-sized first-aid kit from the ground, something he must’ve fished out of one of his side pouches without Tim noticing.

Dick zipped open a pocket of the kit, and unfolded it on the ground next to him, out of Tim’s sight. “You’re definitely concussed,” Dick rumbled, consulting the contents of the kit. “The likelihood of your ribs being bruised is...high. As for your leg—” Dick stopped abruptly, movements briefly faltering before he pulled a bottle of hand sanitizer and a pair of surgical gloves into view. “I’ll take a look at it after treating your head.”

My head? Tim thought, confused, before realization washed over him.

Concussions usually warranted a mild TBI. Maybe that explained the hot pulses concentrated above his ear. Dazedly, Tim wondered how much the bump would swell. Head bumps tended to grow rather dramatically.

Realizing that Dick was silently waiting for a response, Tim nodded. Then he froze, swallowing thickly.

What he’d first thought was anxiety and fear pooling in his stomach seemed to be slowly turning into something else, something that left his mouth bone dry.

Dick had paused. His white gaze turned to Tim, quietly examining him. “Do you feel nauseous?” He asked bluntly.

Tim nodded, then cursed himself. “A little,” he whispered, voice cracking.

Dick's lips twitched again, corners curving down as the frown returned, and Tim forced himself not to huff a frustrated sigh as he adverted his gaze, his jaw clenching.

While it was true that his carelessness had led to him getting hurt, Tim couldn't stop the unpleasantries following a head injury better than he could stop the moon's trajectory over the night sky. It wasn't like he'd *wanted* this to happen.

Dick, however, seemed to have a different opinion entirely.

"Just breathe," he ordered, his fingers once again moving – *prodding,* Tim realized, *assessing the damage* – against Tim's scalp. "In through your nose and out through your mouth."

"I know how to breathe just fine," Tim snapped, cringing as another surge of pain flashed through his chest, as his stomach lurched dangerously.

Dick grunted lowly, a mix between a displeased sigh and a bitter hum.

For a distressing moment, Tim felt his eyes begin to water.

It was a strange thing, seeing Dick kneeling beside him after all these months, close enough to *touch*, and still being tormented with the knowledge that the distance between them had never been greater. If he were to walk for days upon days, weeks upon weeks, months upon months, they would still never meet again. They had no common goal, no north star that could lead them on the right path. It was as if they were strangers once again, with no knowledge of what the other had endured, and no desire to ask.

The thought made something vile crawl up Tim's throat, a feeling closely resembling *grief* choking him. Looking away, he swallowed bitter tears and forced himself to focus on keeping his breathing as steady as possible, ribs be damned.

The moment his gaze flickered away from Dick, he once again caught sight of the parapet rising up behind him. Suddenly, *immediately*, he was reminded of it all; the way his heart had taken a one-way trip to his stomach; the overwhelming *fear* that had turned his blood to ice, that was still leaving him trembling like a leaf.

He tried to shake the terror he had felt when he realized that his grapple gun had dislodged from his utility belt upon his rough and sudden landing on the roof, when it had dawned on him that his only

safety net had been burnt, leaving him a flightless bird with the ground fast approaching. But by now, the fear and shock had settled into place so deep within him that it was unreachable, its claws refusing to retract from his heart.

How long would it take for the fear to fully pass? How many times would he have to relive the terrifying ordeal of plunging to his death?

(How much of him would there have been left to scrape off of the pavement had he actually fallen?)

Lost in his own mind, Tim didn't notice that he had lifted his hand to the side of his head, where a persistent itch had presented itself. He did notice, however, when his rough, gloved fingers scraped against his scalp.

Dick was there before the gasp had fully left Tim's lips. He snatched Tim's hand away, biting out a sharp, '*Don't touch it.*'

Tim barely registered the words.

All noise surrounding him turned to static as his wide eyes took in the startling amount of *red* coating both his *and* Dick's gloves, glistening wetly as Dick pulled them away from Tim's head and into the bright sunlight.

Despite the claustrophobic warmth of the day, a numbing coldness spread through Tim's chest. What he should've been able to put together since the second he woke up dawned on him. The wet feeling in his hair, the way his fringe was sticking to his forehead, the *warmth* running down his scalp – it all suddenly made so much *sense*.

Tim's gaze snapped to his right on its own volition, and he barely needed to incline his head before he spotted it.

There was a *puddle* of blood by his head. It was bright – alarmingly so, in a terrifying way Tim couldn't begin to comprehend – and so unnaturally *red* against the grey concrete.

And as it trickled out of the shadow and into the bright sunlight, urged by the unnoticeable tilt of the rooftop, it *glistened.*

Tim's ears were ringing. He sucked in a sharp breath through his nose, and a noise escaped his throat when he suddenly realized that what he'd thought he'd been tasting was actually what he'd been *smelling*; metal and iron and—

Calloused fingers settled on Tim's chin and gently but firmly turned his head, forcing him to shift his attention upward. With no option but to comply, Tim fastened his gaze onto those horribly blank lenses, his breath hitching.

"I, I didn't, I—" he stuttered. His lungs were beginning to burn, his teeth now chattering. "I'm…am I *bleeding*?"

And if that wasn't the stupidest fucking question of the century. *Of course,* he was. With the state he was in, it shouldn't even have come as a shock.

It wasn't like Tim was squeamish about blood either. It was a requirement in this line of work to be able to handle excessive injuries, something he *had* to be okay with if he wanted to live past 18.

It was just that he was in so much pain and Dick was acting really *weirdly* and Tim— Tim just wanted to go *home*. It was why the sheer amount of red – of his own *blood* – both trickling down his gloved fingers and pooling on the ground under his head was enough to make his lungs feel like they weren't working anymore.

Dick suddenly moved, and Tim couldn't hide his flinch, nor the grimace that immediately followed as his ribs screamed in pain. In the next moment, his gauntlet was tugged off, the air bitingly cold against his sweaty palms.

At first, Tim thought that Dick wanted to check his pulse again. But instead of pressing his fingers to the inside of his wrist, Dick grabbed Tim's hand and brought it to his chest, firmly trapping it between the bat symbol and the palm of his hand.

Then Dick's other hand cupped Tim's cheek, forcing him to look up, and everything just…stopped.

"It's okay," Dick said softly, *gently*. "You're okay."

Tim's breath caught in his chest, his eyes widening.

It…it was *jarring*; staring up at the cowl, at the entity some people believed was nothing more than a ghost story, all while feeling a warm, calloused thumb resting against his cheek.

But what shocked Tim to his very core was the *kindness* present in Dick's voice. He sounded more like himself than he had in *months*, and

Tim realized with a pang that this wasn't Batman comforting Robin.

This was *Dick* comforting *Tim*.

"Hey, you're okay," Dick repeated, squeezing Tim's hand gently. The thumb began to stroke up and down Tim's cheekbone, a slow and calming rhythm. "Just breathe for me, alright?"

Tim stared up at him, brow furrowed in bewilderment. Then, to his absolute horror, his eyes began to burn. And along with the tears, frustration reared its head once again, sudden and cold and bitter.

This was…this was the *old* Dick. Appearing out of nowhere, bringing with him the promises of love and support, and Tim—

Tim was twelve again, hanging on to every word like they were the secrets of the universe, the key to all locks.

And yet, a burning sensation spread through Tim's chest at the sound of Dick's voice, his throat thickening with emotion.

Tim *recognized* this tactic. He'd seen Nightwing use it on countless victims before, had seen the wonderous effect the smoothed-over voice and calming touches had on scared children and adults alike. And while the compassion wasn't always artificial, it was never *completely* authentic. And the fact that Dick was using it on Tim, after offering him nothing but a cold shoulder since he knelt down next to him – hell, even since the day he'd taken Robin from him – was *hurtful.* It was as if Dick *knew* that the slightest hint of comfort would be enough to make Tim fold.

A rush of heat made Tim's skin prickle as a weak spark of the dormant fire flared up, trying to ignite in the center of his chest.

God. At that moment, Tim could've *hated* him.

But what he hated more was the fact that it was *helping.* The pressure in Tim's chest slowly dissipated as his shuddering breaths began to even out, subconsciously falling in rhythm with the strokes of Dick's thumb against his cheekbone.

Noticing this, Dick gave Tim a small nod, his lips twitching; a broken fraction of a smile. "There you go. You're alright. Just breathe."

A handful of moments later, when the inky black spots had disappeared from Tim's vision and Dick spoke again, his voice was so

soft that the little composure Tim had managed to regain almost *shattered*.

“There’s a one-to-two-inch laceration slightly above and behind your right ear. It’s not deep but it’s bleeding quite a lot.”

Dick continued, voice still as soft as before, and Tim felt sick. “I’m gonna locate, clean, and bandage the wound on your head. Your leg is…” he faltered, swallowing thickly before pressing on. “You have an injury to your upper thigh. I’ll have a look at it when I’m done with your head.”

Tim gritted his teeth, ignoring the pain it caused him. He *knew* this, knew that if either of them ever wanted to get down from this stupid roof before sunset they had to stabilize the injuries and give Tim a fighting chance to make it back to his apartment without bleeding out halfway there.

But the thought of Dick’s hand leaving his cheek, of this rare moment coming to an end—

It made Tim’s stomach churn.

Dick cleared his throat. “Is that…okay?” he asked, sounding suddenly unsure.

Like ripping off a band-aid, Tim thought bitterly, swallowing the pressure building in his throat. “Okay.”

At the sound of his voice cracking, the movement of Dick’s thumb across Tim’s cheekbone stuttered. His nostrils flared as he exhaled deeply through his nose, before he nodded, once. And then, within the blink of an eye, the hands that had previously cupped Tim’s jaw and grasped Tim’s own to his chest were gone.

The suddenness of it all made Tim’s heart sink to his stomach, left him with the horrible feeling of being *untethered*. In a moment of panic, his hand shot out, his fumbling fingers immediately coming in contact with the stiff material of the cape. Ignoring the heat rising up his neck, he gripped it tightly, tying himself to the steady dock as the storm in his mind’s eye reared its head.

This was… it was *embarrassing*, behaving so childishly over something as superficial as a *concussion*.

But Tim wasn’t brave enough to let go, the mere thought of it making

him tighten his grip even further as the pain in his chest ebbed and flowed.

If Dick noticed, he didn't mention it. His hands were once again dressed in surgical gloves, the material smooth and cold against Tim's chin as he guided his head to the side. Tim quickly squeezed his eyes shut, his stomach tightening at the thought of spotting anything remotely *red* on the ground again.

After a few moments of silence, the familiar sound of liquid splashing around in a bottle reached Tim's ears, undoubtedly the saline solution found among most of their medical supplies. Then, a steady spray of a light liquid hit his scalp, and Tim grimaced at the suddenness of it, then even further when the wound began to sting.

"It's alright," Dick murmured, and Tim felt the burn of resentment welling up in his chest. He wanted to bite out something harsh to ease the pressure in his throat, to bat away the thumb brushing up and down his jaw. He didn't *want* Dick's pity.

But in the end, Tim Drake was as predictable as always. He let Dick brush his fringe out of his eyes, let the thumb continue to gently massage his jaw, and the calming words wash over him. Because no matter how hard he tried not to notice, it was *still helping*. With every calming hush and every gentle caress, his inner child seemed to sigh in relief, as if the actions were comparable to applying cooling cream to singed skin.

Another spurt of the solution trickled down Tim's scalp. Dick seemed to be pausing between the administrations, carefully parting Tim's hair to take in the wound. The silence suddenly felt too stifling, too invasive.

Tim carefully cleared his throat. "So…I take it I'm not dying?" The words had already left his lips when he realized he was only half-joking.

Dick's startled. It was the only way to describe the sudden pressure on Tim's scalp, the hissed curse that followed. Tim's eyelids fluttered, almost snapping open in surprise.

When Dick finally spoke, he sounded strangled. "No."

"Oh," Tim said intelligently. He rubbed his thumb against the cape, feeling the material between his fingers. "Would you tell me if I were?"

“Yes.”

The unexpected huff of laughter that expelled out of Tim’s mouth made him wince, his chest protesting. “I don’t, ah, I don’t think you’re…supposed to do that.”

The only response he received was another spurt of saline that splashed across the side of his head. Some of the liquid ran down and across his neck, causing goosebumps to break out over his skin. Tim swallowed, trying to ignore the unpleasant feeling building in his stomach. “Unless you’re just saying that to…keep me calm and I actually *am dying*—”

The pouring abruptly stopped. The plastic bottle, now sounding almost empty, was tossed to the side before something settled against his head. Even though the material was soft, it stung even worse than before, causing the deep pulsating pain to stretch across his forehead. He must’ve let some kind of noise slip out as the pressure immediately eased, the thumb on his jaw twitching before the hand drew back completely.

Tim quelled the sudden pang of anxiety by digging his nails into the palm of his hand.

Then he had to resist the urge to *scream*.

He’d always been one to shy away from physical contact, body growing stiff whenever someone pulled him into a hug – hell, even when someone placed a hand on his *shoulder*.

But now…he didn’t recognize himself anymore.

One gentle touch and it was like his brain had short-circuited. Now, whenever the moments of contact ended Tim felt *deprived* of it in a way he hadn’t before, unable to even *think* clearly if there wasn’t a hand grasping his, or fingers grazing his face.

It *terrified* him.

He should be calling for Clark, for *anyone* who could take him away from the situation, away from *Dick*. But then Dick began bandaging the wound, his hand snaking in under Tim’s neck to lift his head and thread the bandage all the way around, and the name died on Tim’s lips with a shudder.

The world spun when Dick finally lowered him back down, his skin

breaking out into a cold sweat as his stomach churned dangerously. Carefully, Tim cracked his eyes open, the space behind his eye sockets throbbing with new vigor as the brightness of the sky came into view.

Dick's hand, now absent of his surgical glove, came to rest on Tim's cheek, and Tim's gaze instinctively flickered to him.

This time, he couldn't stop the disappointment from blooming in his stomach.

In all honesty, he didn't know what he had been expecting. A reassuring smile? Dick's bare face instead of the cowl? To finally understand what the man was thinking, or what he had to clench his jaw so hard to keep himself from saying?

It was getting harder to continue to engage in the charade, to pretend that any of this – the hand on his cheek, the gentle voice, the comforting words – had been real.

'Truth needs no color.'

It had been one of his mom's favorite sayings, whenever she'd caught Tim in a lie.

'What's true is true, Timothy, and it does not need decoration.'

Right now, the truth was staring Tim in the face. The heavy sighs, the pregnant silences, his clenched jaw; all signs of Dick's frustration. And in turn, it made Tim's own resentment rise, his fingernails digging painfully into his palm.

Because, sure, it *hadn't* been his fight. Dick would've been *fine*, would've been able to knock the gun out of the criminal's hand long before it went off.

But Tim didn't regret what he'd done. Not even for one second.

He had been scouting the site when Batman had shown up. The initial apprehension and instinct to *flee* had turned into reluctant alertness as he'd watched it all play out, as the door to the rooftop had slammed open and another four people came running to the aid of their friends.

The second Tim had seen the man pull the gun from his holster and turn to aim the weapon at Dick's unknowing back, time had slowed to a halt. A memory had resurfaced, from when he had only donned the mask for a few months.

A memory of when he had been a second too late.

Nightwing and Robin had been in a back alley, interrupting an attempted robbery. Tim hadn't even noticed the gun until it had gone off, hadn't even realized anyone had been hit until he turned and saw Nightwing on the ground.

It had only been a graze, nothing that should've warranted any immediate panic. But Tim still remembered with sickeningly vivid detail how, for a horrible few seconds, Dick had stopped moving. And as he'd watched in horror as the pool of blood under the still body began to grow, Tim had been convinced that Dick had just *died*.

Which was why, just as he had made the rough landing on the rooftop and knocked the gun out of the culprit's hand, the words he'd promised to himself while curled up beside Dick in the recovery bed had echoed through his mind;

Never again.

Tim would never again allow Dick to be hurt on his watch. *Ever*.

Taking that leap hadn't been a decision: it had been an instinct— no, a *promise*, and one that Tim would never allow himself to break. Because while Dick was infuriating and deaf-eared and downright *insufferable* at times, for some twisted reason that Tim didn't comprehend, he still loved him.

He just wished Dick could've felt the same. Or at least enough to spare him the death glare he was currently aiming him.

Jesus. When provoked, the intensity of the man's stare was almost comparable to Ra's.

The sudden, horribly intrusive thought made Tim flinch, his eyes widening.

Overcome by a sudden desperation far more intense than before, he gathered the last ounce of his strength, intending to finally reach up and tear the cowl off once and for all. He needed to *see* him, he, he needed to make *sure*—

But before he could even begin to move, Dick suddenly drew away. The cape was tugged out of Tim's grip, and Tim found himself staring up at the clear, blue sky.

For a painful moment, he thought that Dick had finally had enough. That he was once again abandoning him, leaving Tim to make it back home by himself.

Then Tim spotted movement further down and inclined his head just in time to see Dick lean over his leg, taking in the injury on his thigh.

The wave of relief made Tim's eyes burn. He gently let his head fall back to the ground, breathing through the thawing panic.

A sharp click broke the silence as Tim's kneepad was unclipped from the rest of the armor. "Can you move your toes?" Dick asked, peeling the piece from Tim's knee.

Tim made an attempt and bit down on the inside of his lip when burning pain flared up the side of his leg, all the way to the bone. He tried to hide the sob behind a sharp exhale, but knew he had failed when the hand on his calf tightened its grip.

"Red?"

Tim nodded, regretting it when his head spun. "Yeah, I…I can. It just h-hurts."

His voice broke on the last word, and once again, silence fell around them, stifling and inescapable.

This time, Tim could practically *hear* Dick's inner turmoil, could *see* it in the tightness of his shoulders, in the way he was grinding his teeth hard enough for his jaw muscles to strain against the cowl.

Before Tim could call him out on it – before he could scream at him to *stop* being so fucking *angry* at him – Dick scooped his hands underneath Tim's leg – one by his calf, the other one in the crook of his knee – and lifted. Tim gasped, the bitter words dying on his tongue.

"Okay, alright," Dick murmured as he bent Tim's knee until the bottom of his boot was aligned with the ground.

Tim bit the inside of his cheek, breathing shallowly through his nose as his leg burned and ached. Something warm and wet spread from his thigh toward his hip, and the shifted angle allowed Tim to spot the moment a stream of blood escaped a tear in his leg, running down the outside of the fabric. The burst of nausea urged him to quickly turn his attention back to Dick, his vision blurring as he watched the man

duck his head to get a better look at the wound.

Unexpectedly, the sight made Tim's lips twitch. He was caught off guard by how familiar the movement was, by how often he'd seen Bruce do something similar; tilting his head forward as he looked over his glasses at Tim from behind the newspaper; furrowing his brow as he read the math problem over Tim's shoulder; leaning his chin on his intertwined fingers and narrowing his eyes as he stared down at the chessboard in front of him.

Bruce's back had never been so stiff, though, his body never coiled so tightly it physically hurt just to watch.

But then again…Dick's usually wasn't either.

Dick was a gymnast. He had always carried himself as one, back straight and shoulders loose, ready to execute any of his acrobatic flips at a moment's notice. Even clad in Batman's armor, the subtle grace had never left him, his agile movements noticeably different from Bruce's vigorous ones.

So seeing the tightness present in Dick's shoulders and back was… unnerving to say the least. The same could be said of the way he breathed, each ragged exhale heavy and burdened. Even stranger, he seemed to be getting more worked up by the second.

Tim blinked, suddenly noticing the sheen of sweat on Dick's upper lip, the way he flexed his trembling hands before he started working on winding the bandage around Tim's thigh.

Truth needs no color.

His mother's words echoed in his ears, and Tim frowned. He suddenly felt like he was missing something, a trivial piece to the puzzle that prevented him from uncovering the whole picture.

Beside him, Dick suddenly switched the leg he was kneeling on, knees popping audibly. The movement caused the cape to shift, exposing the grappling hook secured to his hip. Tim's thoughts slowed to a stop.

Having moved further down Tim's leg, Dick had positioned himself – and thereby the grapple gun – in the direct sunlight. Now, the metal gleamed, and Tim squinted as something nudged at his brain, as something deep inside his head threaten to take form.

Dick shifted again, and something glistening and wet and *red* coating

one of the hooks caught the sunlight.

Tim froze.

The memory emerged from the depths of his subconscious like an air bubble fighting its way up through water. And suddenly, Tim *remembered*.

He had been shoved off the barrier, nothing but the wind to catch his fall as the rooftop twisted and disappeared out of view.

Then, a voice had cried out, panicked and raw. In the next second, sharp, excruciating pain had erupted through Tim's leg as something had *embedded* itself into his thigh. His descent toward the pavement had come to a violent halt before it had really begun, the momentum of the fall sending him swinging in a sharp arch, still attached to the grapple buried in his thigh.

The last thing he remembered was seeing the side of the building rush up to meet him before it had all gone dark.

Tim flinched out of the memory, his head pounding vigorously.

Dick immediately turned to him, his shifting shadow intercepting the sunlight dancing in Tim's blood. "What's wrong?"

Tim swallowed, gaze flickering toward the grapple. "That's how you caught me."

Dick looked down, and Tim caught the moment his eyes landed on the blood-smeared hook as he suddenly froze. His jaw tightened, muscles jumping as he pressed his teeth together so tightly the cowl strained against them. Then he abruptly pulled his cape forward, obscuring the bloody equipment, and refocused on Tim's leg.

Tim stared at him. All at once, he was overcome with the feeling that he'd said something terribly wrong. Still, it did nothing to prevent him from continuing to make a fool of himself.

"You saved my life," he heard himself say, his mouth having at some point disconnected from his brain and developed free will. "Thank you."

At Tim's words, Dick's movements faltered. "Don't—" He shook his head, turning further away from him. "Don't thank me for this."

Tim frowned, perplexed. “You...you *caught* me—”

Dick whirled around so suddenly that Tim froze. And *there* was the anger, fully exposed in his expression. “I shot you,” he snapped, and Tim’s shoulders ached as they rose towards his ears at the explosiveness of the words. “I—with my grappling hook. I shot you in the *leg*.”

The words took a moment to process, but when they did, Tim’s eyes widened as the reality of the situation presented itself.

This was why Dick was upset? Angry not only because Tim had messed up, but also because Tim had forced Dick to *shoot* him in order to save him? The realization tasted bitter on Tim’s tongue, making his stomach churn as if there were snakes writhing within him.

Without intending to, he found himself mirroring Dick’s previous movement as he shook his head, ignoring how the world around him swayed. “You saved my life,” he repeated. When Dick remained frozen, staring at him in hidden anger, Tim scoffed, letting his eyes slip closed. “And here I thought *I* was going to be the one saving *you*.”

Once again, Tim was met with silence. A moment later he felt Dick continue to secure the gauze against his leg.

Tim didn’t think he was ever going to receive a response when Dick finally spoke up.

“You did.”

Tim cracked open an eye, grimacing when the world took an alarmingly long time to settle. “Hm?”

Dick didn’t look up from Tim’s leg as he spoke, tucking the end of the bandage under itself before settling his hand on Tim’s calf. “I didn’t see the gun. If you hadn’t been there—” He broke off, swallowing thickly, but the silence was telling enough.

Tim’s heartbeat was like a hammer to a nail against his ribs. “I guess we’re even, then,” he rasped.

He then realized that he really shouldn’t try to speak again.

Every time his diaphragm was engaged, the nausea threatened to spill over, his abdomen clenching unpleasantly in silent warning. It didn’t seem to plan on tapering off either. Instead, it kept a relentless grip on

his stomach, growing more prominent with every passing second.

Tim turned his gaze to the sky and tried to breathe through it, just like Dick had instructed. In through the nose, out through the mouth, in through the nose, out through the mouth, in—

His stomach flipped again, and Tim sighed shakily, squeezing his eyes shut. He felt rather than saw Dick tense up, the pressure on his leg disappearing.

“Red?”

“I, uh—” Tim broke off, swallowing convulsively. “I feel sick.”

Dick shuffled closer, hand hovering over Tim’s arm. “Are you going to vomit?”

Tim pinched his eyes shut even further, trying to ignore both the pain it caused and the way his mouth was filling with saliva.

In, and out. In, and out. In, and—

Dread and bile rose from his stomach. Tim snapped his eyes wide open, meeting Dick’s gaze as he nodded vehemently. Not even a second later he was pulled upright and made to lean over to his side just as he started heaving.

Tim knew from experience that throwing up with a concussion sucked. Throwing up with a concussion *and* bruised ribs, however, proved to be way, *way* worse.

With every heave, his head felt like it was splitting open, like someone had found Jason’s iron knuckles and was *bashing* them into his skull. He couldn’t get enough air into his lungs in between his heaves, the pain in his ribs forcing him to take short, hyperventilating spouts of breaths before his stomach constricted again.

Dick must have lied. Tim was pretty sure he *was* dying.

When his stomach finally decided it had had enough, Tim was dizzy with pain.

And he— *he couldn’t breathe*.

He frantically tried to suck air into his lungs, but the agonizing pain that reverberated through his ribcage made his body lock up. It was like a vacuum had formed in his chest, forbidding his muscles from

moving and his lungs from expanding and he couldn't fucking *breathe* —

The next thing he knew, his cheek was pressed against something cold and firm. The crook of an arm propped his head up, another one carefully tightening around his middle as his entire weight was pulled into someone's – into *Dick's* – arms.

Dick's throat vibrated against Tim's forehead, his voice sharp with alarm, but Tim couldn't register the words, too preoccupied with desperately trying to get his lungs to *work* again.

Finally, after several attempts, he managed to suck in a larger gasp of pain, and it was like a rope that had been tied around his ribs *snapped*. One stuttering breath followed the other, his chest burning as if set alight. Little by little, the ringing in his ears diminished, and in its absence, his own wheezing, as well as other sounds surrounding him, made themselves known.

At some point, Dick had started talking. "I'm sorry," he was whispering, arms tightening around Tim before immediately relaxing, as if fighting against the urge to pull him closer in fear of causing him any further pain. "I'm sorry, shh, it's okay, I'm *sorry*."

Tim didn't understand what he was apologizing for, couldn't grasp why he suddenly sounded so *emotional*, voice thick as if he was holding back tears.

But most of all, he couldn't understand or handle how shockingly *genuine* the comfort suddenly felt, even more so when Dick pulled him closer, resting his cheek against the top of his head.

This was what Tim had missed. The comfort, the safety, the *warmth*. He'd missed it so much that finally having it *hurt*.

But knowing that it wasn't *real* – because it *couldn't* be, could it? – hurt even *more*. And despite the pain and fear, despite the burning in his chest and the numbness tingling through his fingertips, he couldn't bear to delude himself any longer. He had no fight left to give. He was so fucking *tired*, the fire in his chest having been reduced to cold ash and charred bones, and he just wanted Dick to—

"Stop," he whimpered. His shoulder screamed at the movement, but he lifted a hand to Dick's chest, trying to hit, scratch, *hurt*. His body betrayed him, only having enough strength to lightly rap his knuckles against the Kevlar. In the next moment, he was clutching onto the

cape with a newfound desperation. “Stop—stop *pretending*—"

Dick’s breath hitched, and Tim felt him shift underneath him, his grip around him loosening as if about to put him back down. Tim’s heart skipped a beat. He reached up with his other hand until he had the cape bundled in both hands, a broken whine escaping him.

“*Don’t,*” he gasped, “I’m s-sorry, I’m—please, *don’t go*.”

Because while he desperately wanted Dick to stop pretending, he didn’t want him to *leave*. He didn’t want to end up alone again, didn’t know if he’d *survive* it this time around. A noose had been tied around his neck, and if Dick let him go now, if he let him fall, it would all be over.

In response, Dick cupped the back of Tim’s head and adjusted his grip on him, pulling him even closer against his chest. “Okay, it’s—it’s *okay*, I got you,” he whispered into Tim’s hair, his voice thick. “I got you, Baby Bird.”

Tim hiccuped on a breath. The nickname, something that had previously caused frustration or embarrassment to bloom, now settled pleasantly into place in his chest. As it did, it stirred something deep within him, the ice that had encased his lungs cracking as a warmer emotion began to take form.

It was like turning his face to the sun peeking through the clouds after a long, dark winter. He wanted to stay like this forever, to soak in as much of the warmth as he could.

His body, however, had a different say in the matter. Agony was still coursing through his ribs, the pain made worse by the curled-up position he was in. He tried to shift and ease the pressure in his chest, but a twinge of pain made him freeze, his lips tightening around a groan.

Dick, of course, noticed. “Hey, I— I’m sorry, but I…I’m gonna have to put you down now, okay?” he said, a peculiar sort of reluctance in his voice. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Tim swallowed, steeling himself. He didn’t *want* him to let go. He wanted to make the most out of this moment, to immortalize the feeling he was swimming in like it was one of the thousands of thousands of pictures he kept on his hard drive, wanted the chance to frame it and treasure it for the rest of his days.

But then his chest spasmed again, and Tim found himself unable to do anything but give a breathless nod. Immediately, Dick lowered him to the ground, cradling his head as he went.

To say that Tim's bruised body didn't appreciate the movement was an understatement. His ribs protested wholeheartedly as the muscles around them stretched, the space behind his eyes pounding with new vigor as blood pulsed through his head. Honestly, he would've very much appreciated if he could've passed out in that moment, to give in to the exhaustion that was steadily replacing the panic that had consumed him only moments before.

Instead, he found himself very much awake in a familiar position, blinking up at Dick's blurry face through tear-filled eyes.

Tim froze, a jolt of shock zapping through him.

Holy shit. That really *was* Dick's face.

At some point between retching up his breakfast and crying into Dick's shoulder, Dick had pulled the cowl back, revealing a messy tangle of black hair, and wide, *unshielded* eyes.

The relief was almost enough to set Tim off crying again. Finally, he could *see* him; the worried tilt of his eyebrows, the upset curve of his mouth, the wet gleam to his blue eyes – eyes that flickered over Tim's features as if trying to find the source of Tim's pain and exterminate it.

Then Tim's eyes widened as the relief was replaced by sheer *horror*.

Despite the agony in his torso and the exhaustion pulling at his very core, Tim surged up.

Dick's eyes widened as he reared back, catching Tim's wrists before he could reach him. "Woah, what are you doing?" Shock laced Dick's voice as he gently lowered Tim's hands to his stomach. "Tim, you need to lie still."

Tim's mind went blank.

Tim had been introduced to the importance of codenames early on in his training. After he had slipped up during patrol in his early Robin days, *Dick* had been the one who'd instilled the importance of keeping their identities hidden at all costs. *He* had been the one to advise him to act as if there was always someone listening in on their coms in

order to make sure that they'd always stay one step ahead of their opponents.

Dick had said that. And now here he was, on an unfamiliar roof that could very well be riddled with surveillance cameras, with his face uncovered while in his Batman gear, *disregarding* their codenames.

Interpreting Tim's shocked silence as compliance, Dick's face softened. "It's okay," he said softly, cupping Tim's face. "Just stay down."

And okay, there was *definitely* something wrong with him. Tim mentally leafed through the potential causes – fear toxin, ivy's pollen, a *concussion* – as he tried and failed to reach the cowl.

"Are you crazy?" Tim wheezed when Dick once again caught his hand. He made a weak attempt to tear himself free, but Dick's grip was like iron, tightening even further as Tim continued to struggle. Pain so intense it stole the air out of his lungs flared up his back, but he couldn't stay still. He needed to cover Dick's face. He needed him to *listen*.

Dick's eyes were boring into his, wide and frantic as he struggled to keep Tim still. "Tim, *stay down*."

Batman's voice tumbled out of Dick's mouth, but Tim blanched for another reason entirely. "Stop saying— what the hell are you *thinking?*"

"Listen to me—*"*

"B, your *cowl—"*

"You're more important than the damn cowl!"

Dick's voice echoed across the rooftop, and Tim froze, his endeavors coming to a sudden stop.

Dick's grip around Tim's wrists had tightened to the point where it almost cut off his circulation. His chest heaved as he stared down at him, his eyes glassy and bewildered.

But no…That wasn't it.

The crazed look in Dick's eyes wasn't due to astonishment. It wasn't even anger. It was *fear*. An overwhelming amount of wild *panic,* and Tim's mind came to a screeching halt, his heartbeat pounding against

his ribs.

He took in Dick's face, all at once noticing his sunken eyes, the alarming pallidity of his skin, the gaunt expression that made him look almost…*lost*. Like he wasn't entirely there, continuously having to blink a vision only he could see out of his eyes.

And Tim…Tim had seen that expression before.

Once when out patrolling, a weak link had caused the chord of Bruce's grapple gun to snap in two. It was only thanks to dumb luck that there had been a rooftop some twenty feet below him to stop his fall to the busy street below. He had messed up his ankle in the rough landing, but other than that he had been fine, on his feet within the span of a few seconds.

Dick's distress, however, had made it seem like he had been *dying*.

Tim still remembered the terrified look on Dick's face as he'd run up to Bruce, the tremble to his voice as he had *ordered* him to immediately return to the cave.

He remembered the muffled crying emanating from Bruce's bedroom the following night, the hushed murmurs of comfort accompanying them.

The ghastly expression hadn't left Dick's face until a whole week later.

And as the memory dissipated, the final piece of the puzzle fell into place.

"D…" Tim said weakly, words failing him.

Dick blew out a sharp breath, hunching over as if a heavy weight had suddenly been placed on his shoulders. An expression as raw as an exposed nerve poked through the cracks of his façade, and Tim found himself unable to tare his eyes away, paralyzed.

The sound of traffic on the streets far below filled the following silence. A siren belatedly joined in, its haunting wail warped by the buildings surrounding them.

The world kept on turning, unbothered by how Dick's own seemed to be falling apart.

Dick licked his lips, fingers twitching against Tim's wrists, and took a

shuddering breath. When he spoke, his voice trembled.

“You fell. I…I *watched* you fall. And I almost didn’t catch you.” His eyes suddenly widened, as if the reality of those words hadn’t settled in until that very moment. Fumbling hands released Tim’s wrists to instead latch onto his shoulders, his grip tight enough to make Tim’s eyes water.

“I thought you were going to *die*, and that you—” Dick broke off, his chest now heaving. “—I thought that you were going to die *hating me.*” The moment the words left his lips, he grimaced, ducking his head. “Fuck, I know, I *know* that that’s fucking selfish, it—none of this is about *m-me*, but that’s what I, that’s all I could think of and how it’s all my fault, and how fucking *sorry* I am, and I, fuck I *can’t*—”

A wet gasp cut the sentence in two, the unspoken words swallowed as Dick’s throat bobbed sporadically.

Tim’s head was spinning.

I thought you’d die hating me.

The sentence repeated itself in his head like a broken record. He couldn’t think, could barely even *breathe*. The wave of shock had flushed out the gnawing anxiety nestled between his ribs, leaving nothing but a deep numbness in its wake.

A part of him wanted nothing more than for Dick to continue. He wanted to find out what more he would say, if the panicked words spilling out of his mouth would be enough to thaw the ice still encasing his heart or absolve the hurt still present in his chest.

But the desperation in Dick’s voice, the fresh tears that rolled down his face, and the way he was heaving for breath as if he was *drowning* caused a new kind of pain to hatch within Tim’s stomach, making it impossible for him to remain silent.

“Hey—” he began, but the rest of the sentence got stuck in his throat when Dick’s eyes suddenly snapped to him. With the Cowl gone, the terror and pain and *guilt* etched into his features were on full display, and Tim felt like he’d been doused with ice-cold water.

“I thought I missed at first,” Dick rasped, continuing as if he couldn’t stop even if he wanted to, as if the events were playing in front of his eyes and he was forced to recount every little detail. “The line didn’t go taught right away and I thought you were falling, and I—I felt like

I couldn't move, that all I could do was watch you *die*, just like I had…like I had when—"

"Hey," Tim said, louder this time. Bending his elbow, he gripped Dick's forearm, a grounding touch. "You caught me." Dick's face crumpled as if he was in pain, but Tim pressed on, wishing he would just *look at him*. "No, listen— you *did*. I'm…I'm okay."

Dick's breath hitched into a sob, a sound so guttural and broken that it made Tim's heart ache. "I almost—" he gasped, breaths escaping him as his unfocused eyes widened. "*You* almost—"

"But I didn't," Tim stressed, grimacing as pain radiated along his sides with each word. "It was—" he shuddered, his stomach flipping as he felt himself falling again, "—really scary. But I'm here. Just…please, be here with me too."

Dick's face twisted into a grimace once again. He ducked his head, shallow, shuddering breaths making his shoulders tremble. For a moment, Tim worried that his words had not reached him. That he had sunk too far into his past that the present was now foreign to him.

But then a trembling sigh was forced past Dick's lips. It lasted barely a second but was followed by yet another one, and another, and another, each new one lasting longer than the previous. Seconds ticked by, and gradually his grip on Tim's shoulder eased, his breaths growing steadier.

Tim, completely unsure of what to do, offered silent comfort by squeezing Dick's arm whenever his breaths stuttered, or his grip on Tim's shoulders tightened viciously. The few moments of stillness gave Tim the opportunity to blink drying tears out of his eyelashes and sniffle wetly when he hoped Dick wouldn't notice.

Finally, Dick's breathing returned to something resembling a normal, albeit slightly forced, pace. At this, the final strands of tension that had sneaked into Tim's shoulders snapped, and he felt himself fully relax against the ground, sighing heavily.

There was a moment of silence, in which both of them just breathed.

Dick was the one who broke it.

"Fuck," he rasped, his voice quivering. Then he drew in a sharp breath and abruptly leaned back, hastily wiping at his cheeks and mouth with a shaking hand. "Sorry, I didn't mean to—" his breath hitched,

and he pinched his eyes shut. “I’m, *shit,* I didn’t mean to—“

“Stop.” Tim hadn’t meant to sound so sharp, least of all make Dick flinch. Urging the guilt away, he squeezed Dick’s arm. “Don’t—you’re just getting…worked up again.”

A sharp breath expelled out of Dick’s mouth, like he’d taken a hit to the abdomen. His fingers trembled as he pressed them against his eyelids, sucking in a deep breath before carefully letting it back out. “I—you’re right, I’m sorry, I’m—” Sniffling, he let his hand fall, wiping it against his thigh almost frantically. Then he laughed, a broken, choked sound. “Jesus, I feel like I’m losing it.”

Same, Tim instinctively wanted to respond, almost vigorously. Before he could, however, a painful reminder of his previous, jarring movements suddenly reverberated through him.

At his flinch and following groan, Dick’s gaze immediately snapped to him. His eyes cleared even further, a familiar sharpness returning to them as he took in Tim’s expression with obvious concern.

Then he jolted, head snapping to the side as if having suddenly heard something.

Tim immediately mirrored him, gaze darting over the other end of the rooftop. Fear sunk its teeth into his gut as he imagined their opponent having called for backup, that at any moment the rooftop would be flooded by a dozen more gang members itching for revenge.

Then Dick lifted a hand to his ear, twisting his neck to look up at the sky, and the tension that had sneaked into Tim’s back bled away as quickly as it had arrived.

“Copy,” Dick said, clearing his throat when his voice came out ragged. He then paused, his gaze darting to Tim. “He’s—yes, we’re alright. Thank you, A. See you in a bit.”

His hand fell away from his ear with a weary sigh. “A says the jet will be here any moment,” he informed Tim, grimacing as he shifted to sit down fully on the ground.

Tim blinked. The *Jet?*

His surprise must’ve been clear on his face; the moment Dick glanced at him he huffed out a strained laugh. “What, you thought I’d just carry you down *two hundred* flights of stairs?” He shook his head, his

hand returning to Tim's arm, still smiling. "We have to get you off of this damn roof one way or another. It's not like I can just *leave* you here."

Tim froze. A confusing mix of guilt and resentment spread through his stomach, making his throat tighten.

It's not like I can just leave *you here.*

As if that hadn't been what Tim had expected ever since Dick had shown up. As if he hadn't waited for Dick to tell him to find his own way back to his apartment the moment he was done with patching him up.

As if Dick hadn't already abandoned him once before.

Feeling too winded to pry open *that* can of worms, Tim swallowed his instinctive reply and attempted a smile, hoping to make it seem like he was too exhausted to answer – something that wasn't entirely untrue.

With the way Dick's own smile slowly slid from his face, Tim knew he had failed.

"What, you—" Dick spluttered, twisting to face Tim fully. "I wouldn't just…*leave* you here. That's—you *know* that, right?"

If Tim had possessed the energy to do so, he would've huffed out a laugh. Maybe even rolled his eyes for good measure. *Don't be an idiot,* he would've said. *Of course you wouldn't do that to me.*

But Tim was too tired to lie.

When Dick's face fell, Tim had to look away. His chest already ached, the sight of the man's heartbreak only making it worse.

With that, a newfound silence stretched between them. The air had grown thick, laced with a dangerous uncertainty that hadn't been present before. It was as if they were on either side of a massive clearing, the ground riddled with hidden mines, and neither of them wanted to take the first step and risk whatever had taken shape between them being blown to pieces.

Dick proved to be the braver – or more foolish – of the two.

"Tim?" he asked quietly. When Tim turned to him, he was surprised to

see the sudden *nervousness* the man was exuding, made evident by how adamantly he was avoiding Tim's gaze, and how he kept fidgeting with his fingers, tapping against Tim's arm.

"I was thinking that maybe we could, um. Maybe we could talk sometime? About. You know. Everything." His gaze met Tim's for a fraction of a second before flickering away, this time lowering to the ground. "We don't have to, of course. I'm not…*expecting* anything from you. I just—" his eyebrows knit together once again, his voice growing hoarse. "I just— I *hate* the thought of losing you more than I already have."

Tim stared at him.

Six months ago, he would've done anything for this, for the words spilling out of Dick's mouth, to be a reality.

Now, however?

The pain was still there, fresh and jagged, a wound that had just started to scab over. Picking on it could lead to *more* pain, could invite the risk of infection, and leave a scar worse than the currently healing one.

But deep within his chest, another emotion had begun to stir. Something he hadn't felt in a long time.

Hope.

The shock caused by Dick's outburst had since diminished, the numbness receding. Though instead of simply being replaced by the ache of bitter loneliness that he'd grown so accustomed to during the past six months, a strange warmth was spreading through his chest.

It was like Tim had unconsciously caught Dick's words as they'd tumbled out of his mouth and was now cradling them close to his heart, pleasantly surprised by the warmth they emitted. And unlike the scorching flame that had kept him going during the past six months, this was a gentler, nurturing light. One that only grew brighter by the second.

Tim didn't know how he would feel later on. If he would be *brave* enough to give the answer resting on his tongue. But for now, the warm emotion only grew, easing the knot of anxiety and emotional conflict that had taken root moments before, instead offering him courage.

And he realized that what he wanted more than anything was to put an end to this *conflict* between them, once and for all.

He wanted to *heal*.

And this could be a step in the right direction.

Dick's gaze flickered to Tim's face again, and whatever he found there made his eyebrows knit together in concern. "I'm sorry, that was stupid, I shouldn't have—" he took a breath and squeezed Tim's arm ever so gently, offering him a pained smile. "Don't answer now. I'll ask you again when you're feeling better, or *never* if, if that's what you —"

"No, I, um—" Blinking the mist out of his eyes, Tim's gaze flickered from Dick's face to his shoulder, the other man's gaze suddenly too intense to meet. "I'd like that," he settled on, a cracked whisper.

Dick's eyebrows shot up, a look of astonishment flashing across his face. "Oh," he breathed. Then he cleared his throat, schooling his expression into something only slightly more neutral. "Okay, that's. That's good. I mean— I'm glad."

Tim hummed, ribs throbbing in silent warning. Then, unexpectedly, he *yawned*. The adrenaline had long since run its course, and the sudden absence of it left him weak and trembling and fucking *exhausted*.

Above him, Dick laughed breathlessly. "Hey," he said, squeezing Tim's arm. Tim turned his attention back to him, catching the moment Dick's face broke into a small smile. It was a strained thing, his cheeks still damp and the tip of his nose red, but his eyes held so much warmth that Tim's breath hitched. "I love you, buddy."

Tim's mouth went bone dry. He tried to speak, but his throat was suddenly too thick to talk, his lips stunned into stillness.

When was the last time he'd heard those words? They sounded alien to his ears and yet so *right*, immediately carving themselves into his heart, forceful yet welcome, painful yet healing. There, they took root, blossoming into something that Tim hadn't thought to nurture for days, for weeks, for *months*.

And the next thing he knew, he was crying.

Dick's eyes widened, a surprised exhale expelling out of his mouth.

“Oh, baby bird,” he croaked, bringing a hand up to gently cup the crown of Tim’s head. “Hey, hey, no, it’s okay. I’m sorry, I…I just wanted you to know.”

He sounded so bewildered, so *terrified* that it made Tim wheeze out a laugh, almost indistinguishable from the hitched breath that followed closely thereafter. He hadn’t thought he’d had any tears left but was proven wrong as he felt them roll across his temples, soaking the bandages. Dick, with his face twisted into a broken frown, gently brushed them away, cupping his face as he did.

By this point, the pain in Tim’s chest was numbing in its intensity. He was sure he was leaving indents in the Kevlar of Dick’s forearm, knew that Dick had noticed it when he suddenly leaned in closer, a feather-light hand coming to rest on his shoulder.

“Hey, just breathe, okay? Breathe with me.”

Once again, Tim found himself coached into slowing his breathing, mimicking the other man’s pattern to the best of his ability without putting a strain on his ribs. Before long, the tension was bleeding out of his shoulders as his breaths evened out.

Somewhere below them, music trickled out from an open window – a melodic tune that reminded Tim of spring. Of new beginnings. And despite the emotions keeping an iron grip around his heart, Tim found himself starting to relax.

Maybe even a little bit too much.

He only realized the moving thumb on his cheek was making his eyelids droop when Dick gently tapped on his jaw. “Try to stay awake, okay?” Dick said softly. “*A* says he’ll be here in two.”

In Tim’s defense, he really did try.

He stayed conscious long enough to pinpoint the moment the hum of the jet’s engine pierced the air, heard it reach a crescendo as it approached them, kicking debris and dirt into the air. Then he blinked and he was suddenly looking up at the inside of the jet.

Dick was sitting beside him. One hand was on the stretcher, the other one gently pressing down on Tim’s arm, as if he didn’t trust the straps pulled across his stomach to do their job.

The moment their eyes met, Dick leaned forward, smiling weakly. “It’s

okay, you're all right. You can rest for a bit. I—we'll take care of you, I promise."

Tim could only hum in response, heavy eyelids slipping closed. He was just starting to drift again, sung to sleep by the hum of the engine when he felt Dick's hand land in his hair.

"Don't scare me like that again, baby bird."

The weight of the whispered words made Tim's stomach clench, the way his voice trembled forcing him to open his eyes again.

Dick was gazing at him with such sadness and concern and *care* that it stole the air from Tim's lungs. His body moved on its own as he bent his elbow, latching onto Dick's hand. Only when the other man adjusted his grip, squeezing back just as tightly did his pulse start to slow down.

They had a lot to talk about, and a long way yet to go. The vast distance between them was still there, miles upon miles of uncharted territory that would have to be traversed before they could meet at anything even *resembling* reconciliation. For Tim, each lonely step there would be a leap of faith, with no guarantee of anyone catching him if he were to stumble and fall.

It felt almost too daunting to *try,* alone as he was.

But then again, that wasn't entirely true. He wasn't *alone* anymore.

Not when he felt Dick brush the hair from his eyes and caress his knuckles with a calloused thumb, or as the gentle shuddering of the jet rocked him back to sleep with the promise of taking him someplace he might be able to call *home* once again.

And despite being swaddled in the soft embrace of sleep and with eyelids fluttering from soon-to-be-forgotten dreams, Tim knew that even if the journey would take him days, weeks, or *months*, and as long as they kept walking, there could come a day when he would spot a familiar figure approaching him from the distance.

That one day, he could finally, *truly*, be reunited with his brother.

End Notes

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